CHATURANG KATHA

Vetala Stories

Lavanyavati

No. 512 PICTORIAL CLASSICS FOR YOUNG AND OLD Rs. 2.50

CHATURANG KATHA

One of the most intriguing collections of Indian tales is the *Vetala Panchavimshati*—twenty-five stories told to King Vikramaditya of Ujjaini by a *vetala*. These stories rose out of a night-long dialogue during which Vikramaditya pits his wisdom against the *vetala's* ready wit.

Lavanyavati and *Gunakar* are two more *vetala* tales retold for the reader's delight in the CHATURANG KATHA series which has already brought you *vetala* stories in its earlier issues—*Padmavati*, *Virvar* and *The Strange Sacrifice*.

In *Lavanyavati*, a beautiful young woman disappears mysteriously and her frantic husband sets out to look for her. In *Gunakar*, the impoverished son of a rich man wanders forth to encounter strange happenings—and both stories teach us in delightful story form, lessons in worldly wisdom

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LAVANYAVATI

ON A DARK, WINTRY NIGHT WHEN MOST MEN SEEK THE SOFT COMFORT OF A WARM BED, THE MONARCH OF UJJAINI, VIKRAMADITYA, CHOSE TO BE OUT IN THE CITY CEMETERY. AND ON HIS BACK, A CLAWED HAND RESTING ON HIS ILLUSTRIOUS CROWNED HEAD, WAS A VETALA.*

THE SITUATION IN WHICH HE FOUND HIMSELF WAS EVEN STRANGER THAN THE COMPANY HE KEPT. HE HAD TO DELIVER THE VETALA TO AN ASCETIC-IN SILENCE. SPEECH MEANT THE VETALA WOULD FLY BACK TO HIS PERCH. BUT THE VETALA TOLD STORIES AND POSED RIDDLES WHICH THE KING HAD TO SOLVE IF HE COULD. AS THE SPIRIT REMINDED HIM-

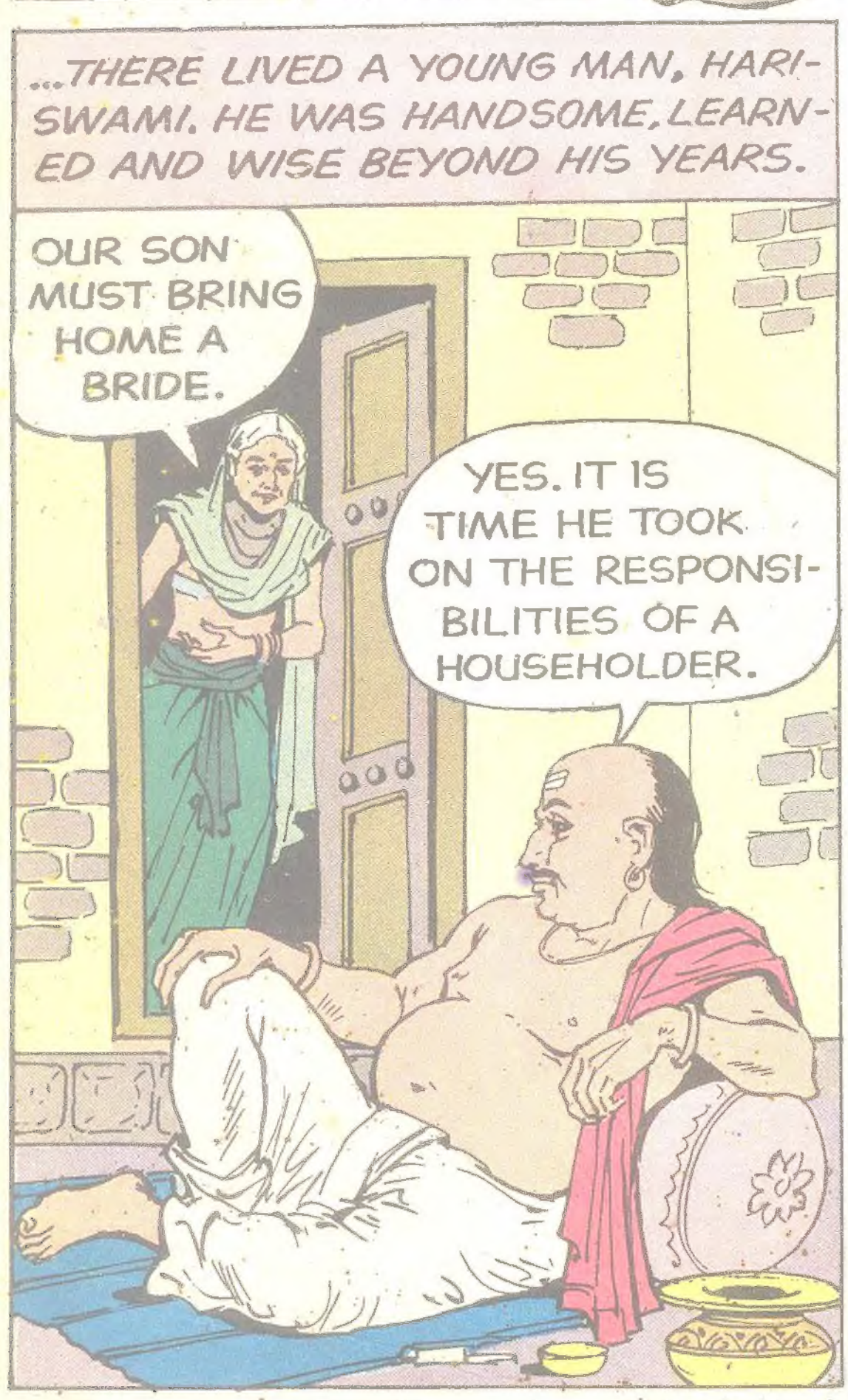
IF YOU KNOW THE ANSWER AND DO NOT REPLY, YOUR HEAD WILL BURST INTO A THOUSAND PIECES.

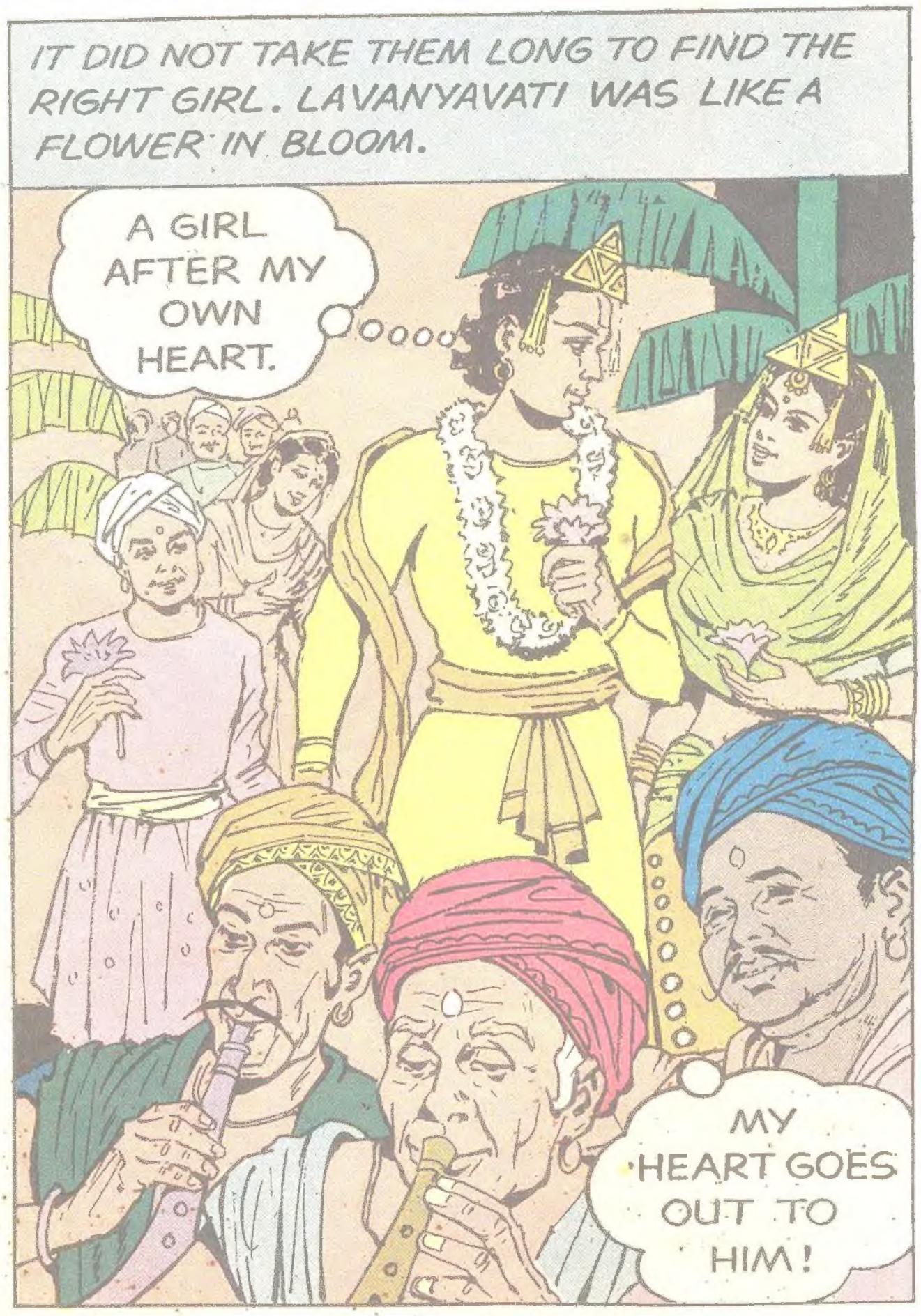
CURSE MY WISDOM! I NEVER THOUGHT I WOULD BE IN DANGER OF BURSTING WITH IT.

*A SPIRIT THAT HAUNTS CORPSES.

MY FEET WILL GIVE WAY IF I KEEP GOING AFTER THIS ELUSIVE SPIRIT!
FOR THE KING HAD ALREADY ANSWERED MANY RIDDLES, BREAKING SILENCE AS MANY TIMES, WALKING WEARILY BACK EACH TIME TO FETCH THE VETALA FROM HIS PERCH.

THE VETALA BEGAN–
IN CHURAPUR, WHEN KING CHURAMAN RULED...
DID VETALAS ORDER KINGS ABOUT AS THEY DO NOW, I WONDER. AND DID KINGS GO PROWLING ROUND AT NIGHT LIKE COMMON ERRAND BOYS?


...THERE LIVED A YOUNG MAN, HARISWAMI. HE WAS HANDSOME, LEARNED AND WISE BEYOND HIS YEARS.
OUR SON MUST BRING HOME A BRIDE.
YES. IT IS TIME HE TOOK ON THE RESPONSIBILITIES OF A HOUSEHOLDER.


IT DID NOT TAKE THEM LONG TO FIND THE RIGHT GIRL. LAVANYAVATI WAS LIKE A FLOWER IN BLOOM.
A GIRL AFTER MY OWN HEART.
MY HEART GOES OUT TO HIM!

AS SHE ENTERED HER HUSBAND'S HOME-

YOU BRING YOUR WEALTH OF BEAUTY TO GRACE OUR HOME.

MAY THE GLOW OF HAPPINESS ON YOUR FACE NEVER GROW DIM!

SHE BROUGHT JOY AND LIGHT INTO THE EVENING OF THEIR LIVES. THEY WOKE TO THE GENTLE CLATTER OF POTS AND PANS...

...AS SHE SET THEM A-BUBBLING WITH DELECTABLE FOOD.

SHE SEASONS THE FOOD MOST DELICATELY.

SHE SEASONS IT WITH LOVING CARE.

TO HER HUSBAND SHE WAS A SOURCE OF WONDER AND DELIGHT.

I STEP INTO THIS COURTYARD AND THE THOUGHT OF YOU REVIVES MY TIRED SPIRITS!

SPRING TURNED TO SUMMER AS THEIR LOVE GREW, FIRM AND STURDY LIKE A WELL-TENDED PLANT. ONE HOT STILL NIGHT–

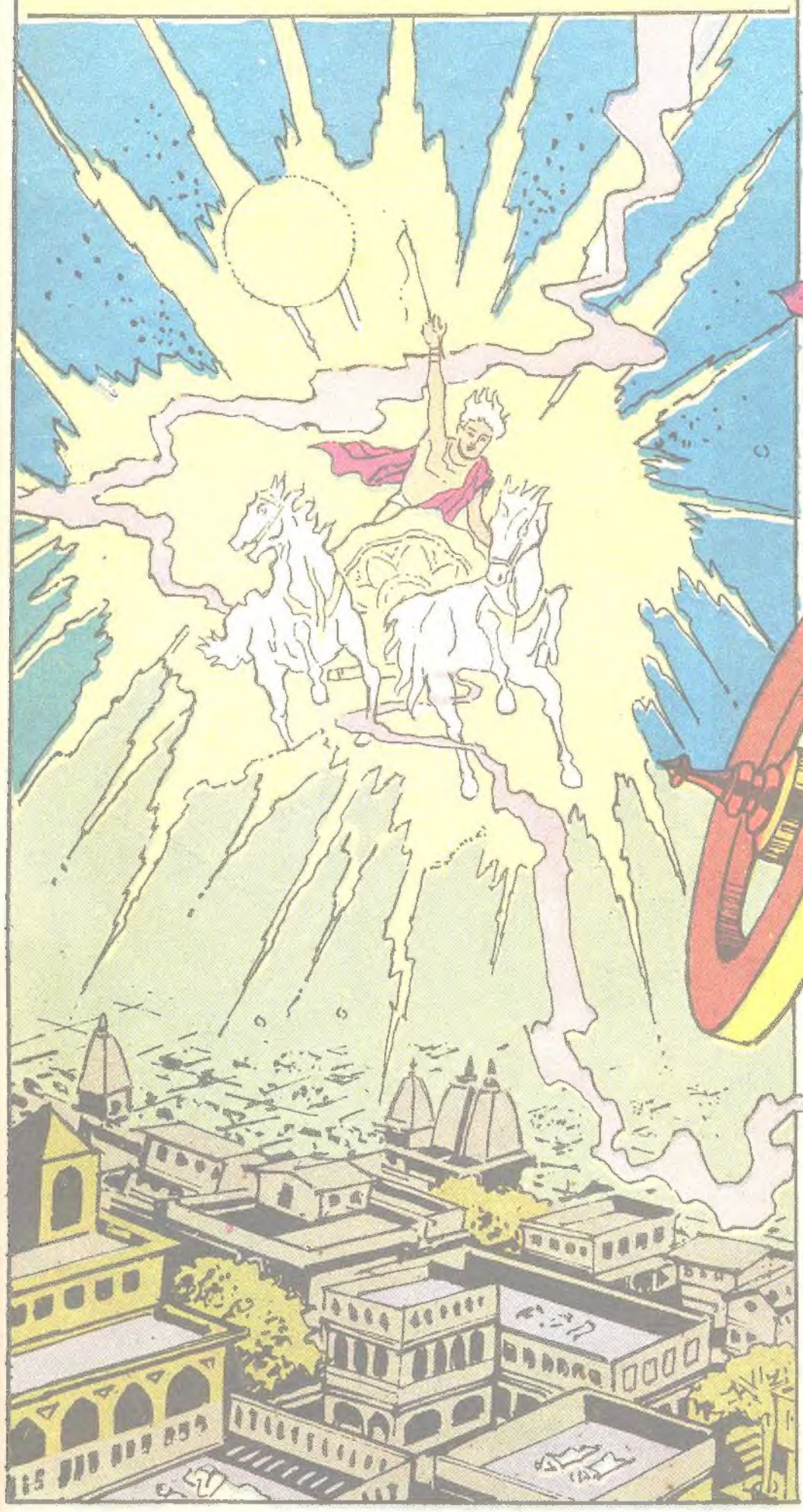
THE WALLS SEEM TO CLOSE IN ON US!

LET US SLEEP IN THE OPEN. IT WILL BE COOLER THERE.

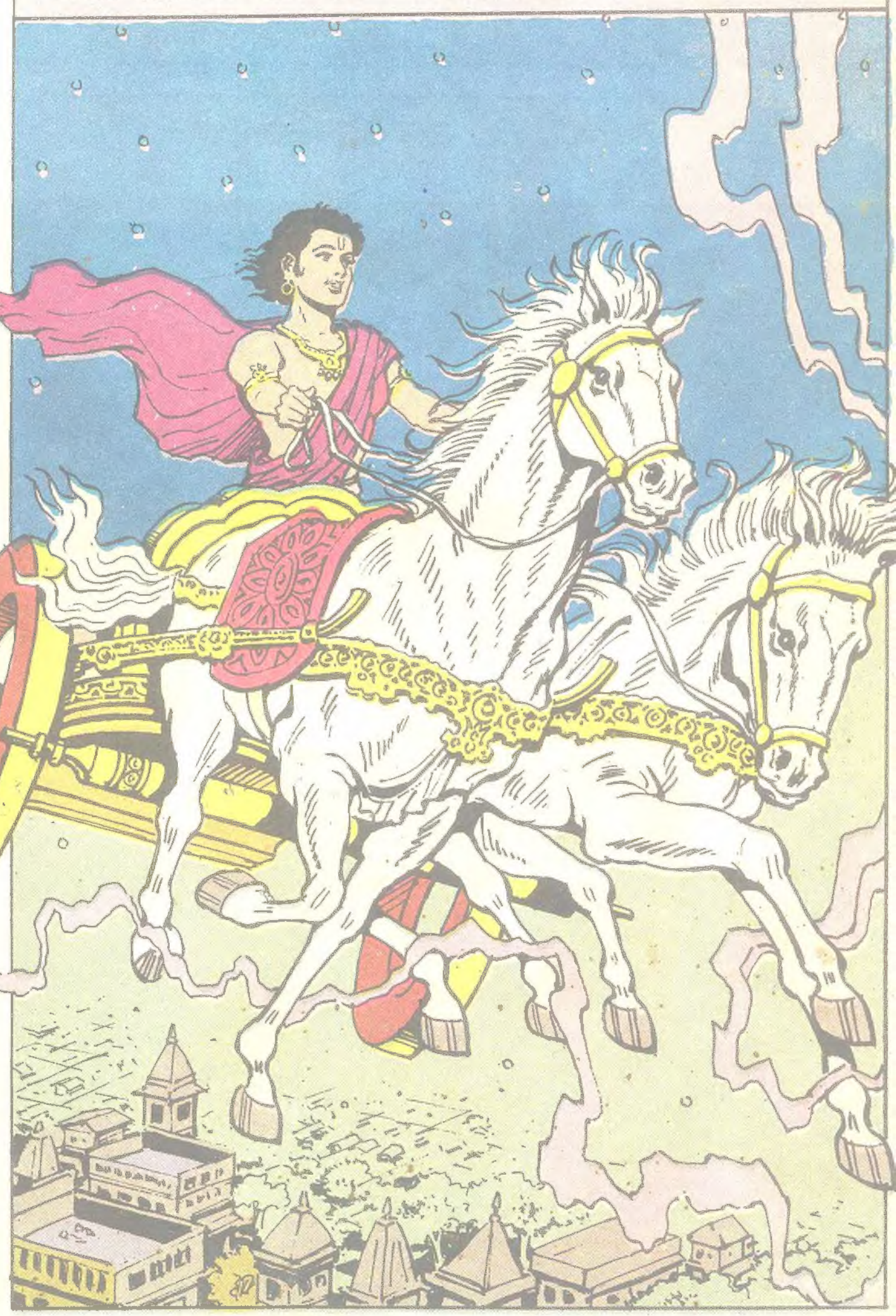
SPREADING THEIR MATS ON THE ROOF-TOP OF THEIR HOUSE, THEY LAY DOWN AND FELL FAST ASLEEP.

IT WAS A CLEAR SUMMER NIGHT WITH MOONLIGHT FALLING ON HEAPS OF SOFT CLOUD SPREAD OVER A VELVET SKY. IT WAS A NIGHT FOR MYSTERY AND MAGIC...

...WHEN AERIAL SPIRITS STIRRED AND SET OUT IN THEIR WIND-DRIVEN CHARIOTS IN SEARCH OF BEAUTY AND WONDER.



AND SO IT WAS THAT A VIDYADHARA* RANGED THE SKIES CLOSE TO EARTH, SNIFFING THE SCENTED SUMMER AIR.



* DEMI-GOD

AS HE PASSED OVER THE SLEEPING TOWN OF CHURAPUR, HIS EYES RESTED ON THE ROOF-TOPS WHERE PEOPLE LAY IN THE STILLNESS OF DEEP SLUMBER. SUDDENLY–

WHAT A BEAUTIFUL CREATURE!

HE HAD SEEN LAVANYAVATI, HER BEAUTY HEIGHTENED BY THE MOON'S SOFT GLOW.

DISMOUNTING, HE GATHERED HER INTO HIS ARMS...

...AND WITH THE SPEED OF LIGHTNING HE DISAPPEARED WITH HER INTO THE HIGHER REGIONS, OUT OF HUMAN SIGHT AND HEARING.

HARISWAMI STIRRED AS HE SAW THE WHOLE THING IN A DREAM.

WHAT A HORRIBLE DREAM! MY LAVANYAVATI...

HIS WORDS FROZE ON HIS TONGUE AS HE TOUCHED HER BED, STILL WARM FROM HER PRESENCE.

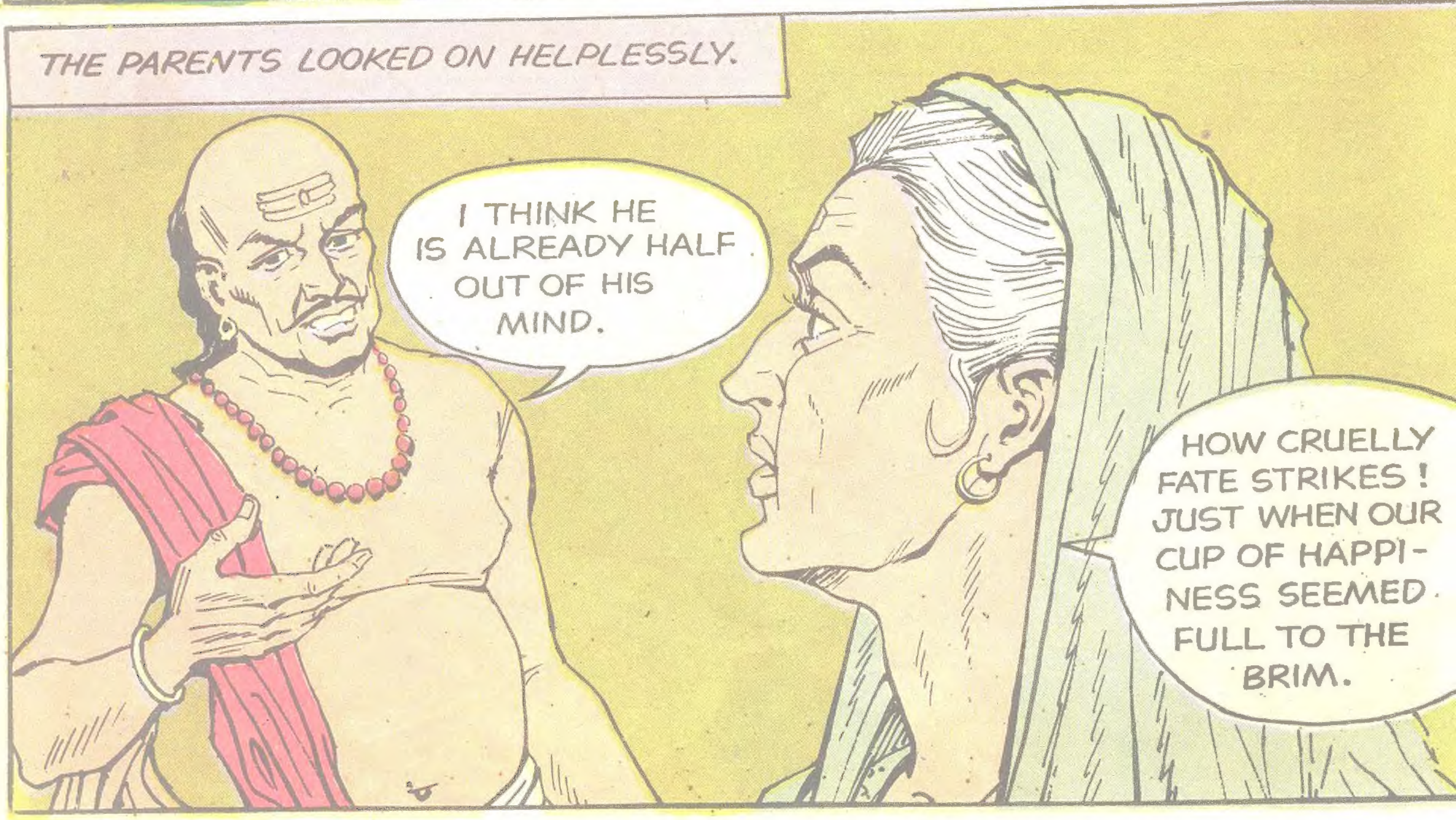
HE WOKE UP HIS FATHER AND MOTHER WHO WERE EQUALLY PUZZLED.

SHE MUST HAVE BEEN SPIRITED AWAY. SHE COULD NOT HAVE LEFT YOU!

BE IT MAN OR SPIRIT; GOD OR DEVIL, I WILL NOT REST TILL I FIND HER!

HIS PARENTS TRIED TO CALM HIS FRENZY.
YOU MUST WAIT. WE ARE BOUND TO GET SOME NEWS.
WHERE WILL YOU LOOK FOR HER ?

BUT THE YOUNG MAN, FRANTIC IN HIS GRIEF, WOULD NOT LISTEN TO THEM.
WAITING IS OUT OF THE QUESTION. IF I SIT HERE DOING NOTHING, I WILL GO OUT OF MY MIND.


THE PARENTS LOOKED ON HELPLESSLY.
I THINK HE IS ALREADY HALF OUT OF HIS MIND.
HOW CRUELLY FATE STRIKES ! JUST WHEN OUR CUP OF HAPPI-NESS SEEMED FULL TO THE BRIM.

HARISWAMI SET OUT IN THE MORNING. HE WALKED BLINDLY ON...

...THROUGH THE TOWN, STOPPING PEOPLE ON THE STREETS.

HAVE YOU SEEN HER?

NO. HOW SHOULD WE?

IT WAS ALWAYS THE SAME ANSWER, DASHING HIS RISING HOPES TILL THEY ROSE NO MORE.

WE HAVE SEEN NO WOMAN OF THAT DESCRIPTION.

THIS MUCH IS CERTAIN– SHE IS NOT HERE. I MUST JOURNEY ON.

AND HE WANDERED FORTH, LOOKING FOR HIS LOST WIFE, SCANNING COURTYARDS...

...PEERING THROUGH WINDOWS...

...AND SEARCHING PARKS AND GARDENS:
THAT CREATURE WITH MATTED HAIR AND DIRTY CLOTHES HAS BEEN FOLLOWING US.
HE'S QUITE HARMLESS. HE'S BEEN SEEN BY QUITE A FEW PEOPLE.

AFTER MANY DAYS OF WANDERING, HARISWAMI BEGAN TO GIVE UP HOPE OF EVER FINDING LAVANYAVATI.

SHE SEEMS TO HAVE GONE, LEAVING NO TRACE.

TIRED AND FAINT WITH HUNGER, HE STARTED OFF IN SEARCH OF FOOD.

I MUST EAT SOMETHING.

HE PAUSED AT A DOORWAY AND CALLED OUT TO THE PEOPLE INSIDE.

WHAT CAN I DO FOR YOU?

GOOD SIR, I HAVE NOT EATEN FOR DAYS. COULD YOU GIVE ME SOMETHING?

THE BRAHMIN WAS KIND.

HERE IS SOME RICE COOKED IN MILK.

I AM GRATEFUL.

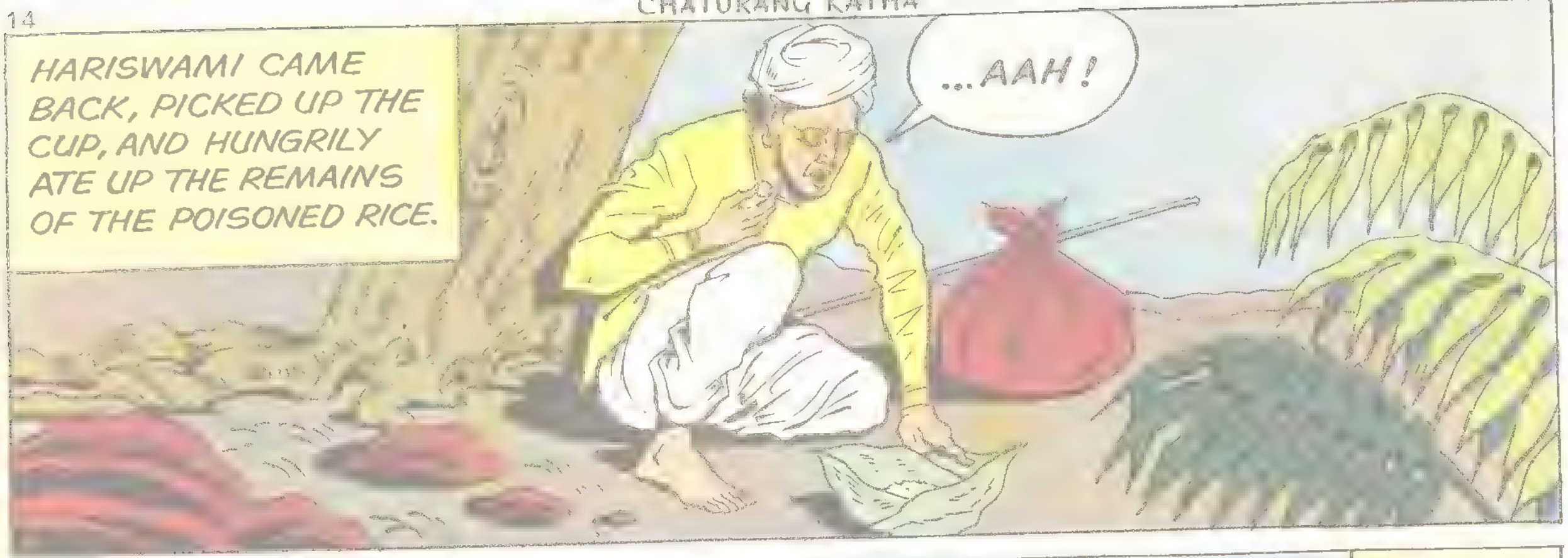
PLACING THE FOOD IN THE HOLLOW OF AN OLD TREE...

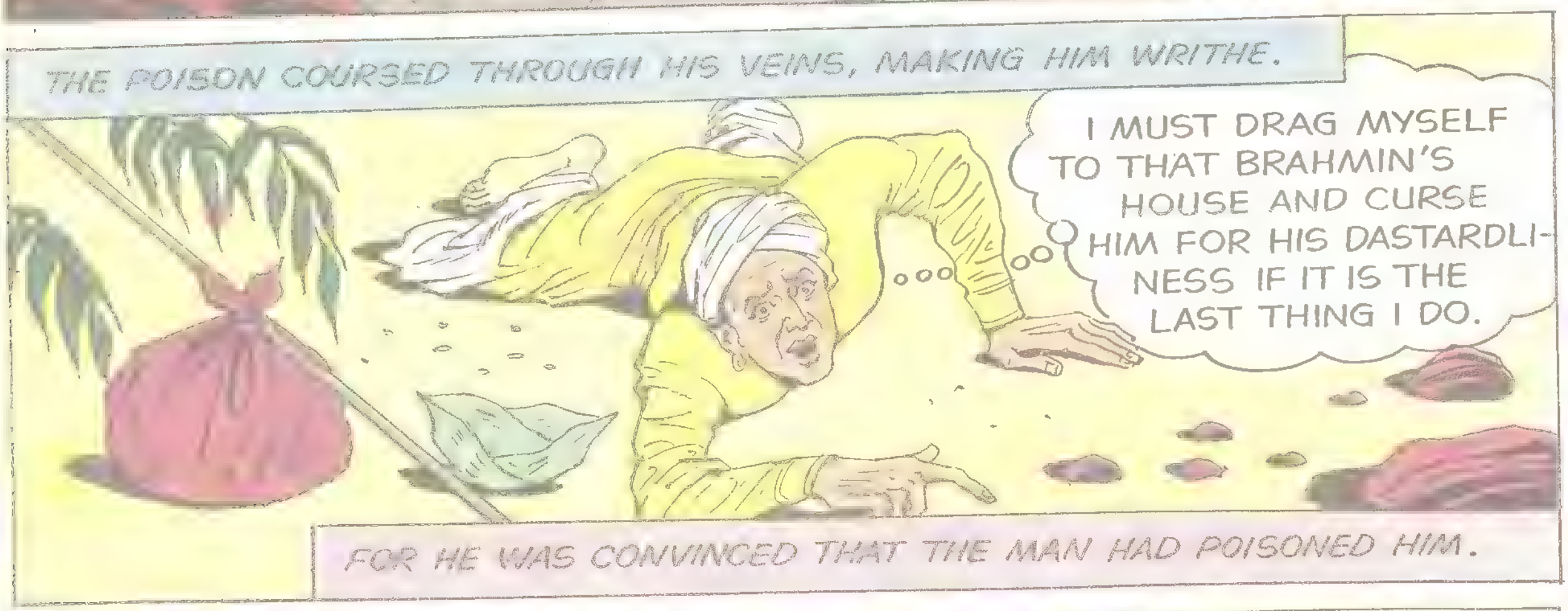
...HE PLUNGED INTO THE RIVER TO WASH AND REFRESH HIMSELF.

THE STEAMING RICE, FLAVOURED WITH SWEET SPICES ATTRACTED A DEADLY SNAKE HIDING CLOSE TO THAT VERY HOLLOW.

SWIFTLY, NOISELESSLY, THE SNAKE SLITHERED UP, SHOT HIS POISONOUS TONGUE INTO THE CUP, ATE...

...AND AS NOISELESSLY, SLID AWAY.


HARISWAMI CAME BACK, PICKED UP THE CUP, AND HUNGRILY ATE UP THE REMAINS OF THE POISONED RICE.
...AAH!


THE POISON COURSED THROUGH HIS VEINS, MAKING HIM WRITHE.
I MUST DRAG MYSELF TO THAT BRAHMIN'S HOUSE AND CURSE HIM FOR HIS DASTARDLINESS IF IT IS THE LAST THING I DO.
FOR HE WAS CONVINCED THAT THE MAN HAD POISONED HIM.

AS HE CRAWLED UP THE STEPS...
WHAT...
YOU CRUEL, COWARDLY MAN – TO POISON AN INNOCENT STRANGER!

BUT...
I DID YOU NO HARM!
AND HARISWAMI DROPPED DEAD.

THE BRAHMIN IMMEDIATELY JUMPED TO A DREADFUL CONCLUSION. CALLING OUT TO HIS WIFE–

YOU WICKED WOMAN! YOU MURDERED AN INNOCENT MAN.

BUT... BUT...

HE WOULD NOT LET HER FINISH. PUSHING HER OUT–

OUT OF MY HOUSE! DON'T EVER DARE TO CROSS MY THRESHOLD!

THE VETALA'S HAND BRUSHED AGAINST VIKRAMADITYA'S CHEEK.

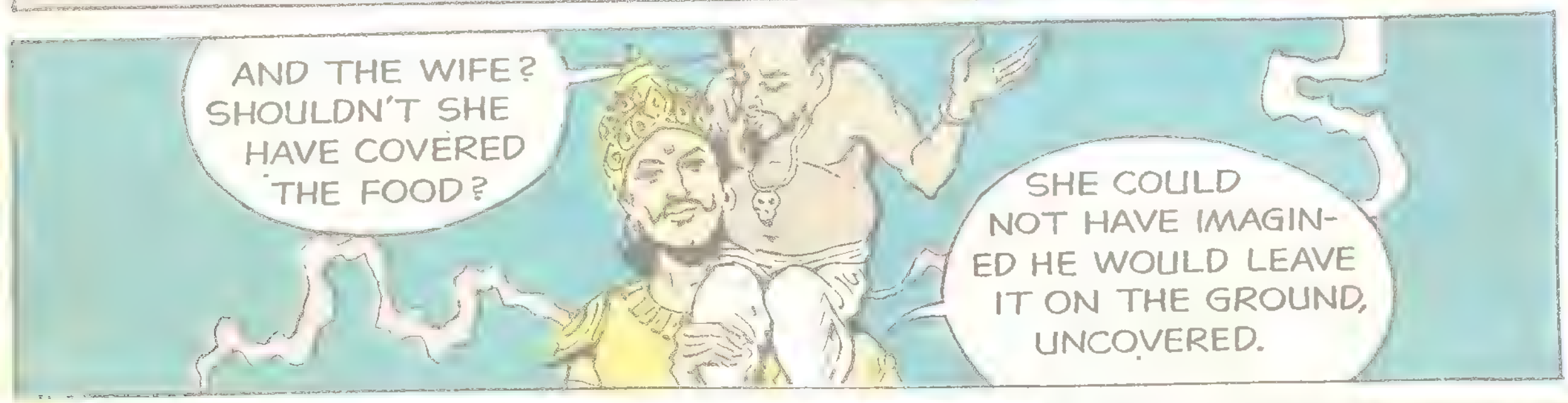
THE QUESTION IS COMING – I CAN FEEL IT.

LISTEN CAREFULLY. IT IS A DIFFICULT MATTER THAT I AM GOING TO PLACE BEFORE YOU.

DIFFICULT IT WILL BE. WHAT I WANT IS NOT JUST A DIFFICULT MATTER BUT AN IMPOSSIBLE ONE.

WHICH OF THE THREE WAS GUILTY?

MUST I BE SO CLEAR-HEADED?
THE SNAKE CANNOT HELP SECRETING POISON, SO HE IS NOT GUILTY. THE BRAHMIN WAS GIVING ALMS AS HIS DHARMA* REQUIRES OF HIM. SO HE IS NOT GUILTY EITHER.


AND THE WIFE? SHOULDN'T SHE HAVE COVERED THE FOOD?
SHE COULD NOT HAVE IMAGINED HE WOULD LEAVE IT ON THE GROUND, UNCOVERED.

WHAT ABOUT HARI-SWAMI HIMSELF? WASN'T HE GUILTY OF CARELESS-NESS?
WHEN A MAN IS OUT OF HIS SENSES WITH GRIEF, HE IS NOT RESPONSIBLE FOR HIS ACTIONS. THE WHOLE INCIDENT WAS JUST FATED TO HAPPEN.

HAVING SPOKEN, HE SPUN ROUND AND SHOUTED AFTER THE DISAPPEARING VETALA-
PUT YOUR NEXT STORY TOGETHER, FOR I AM COMING, MY CLEVER SPIRIT!

GUNAKAR

THE VETALA WAS BACK ON VIKRAMADITYA'S SHOULDER.

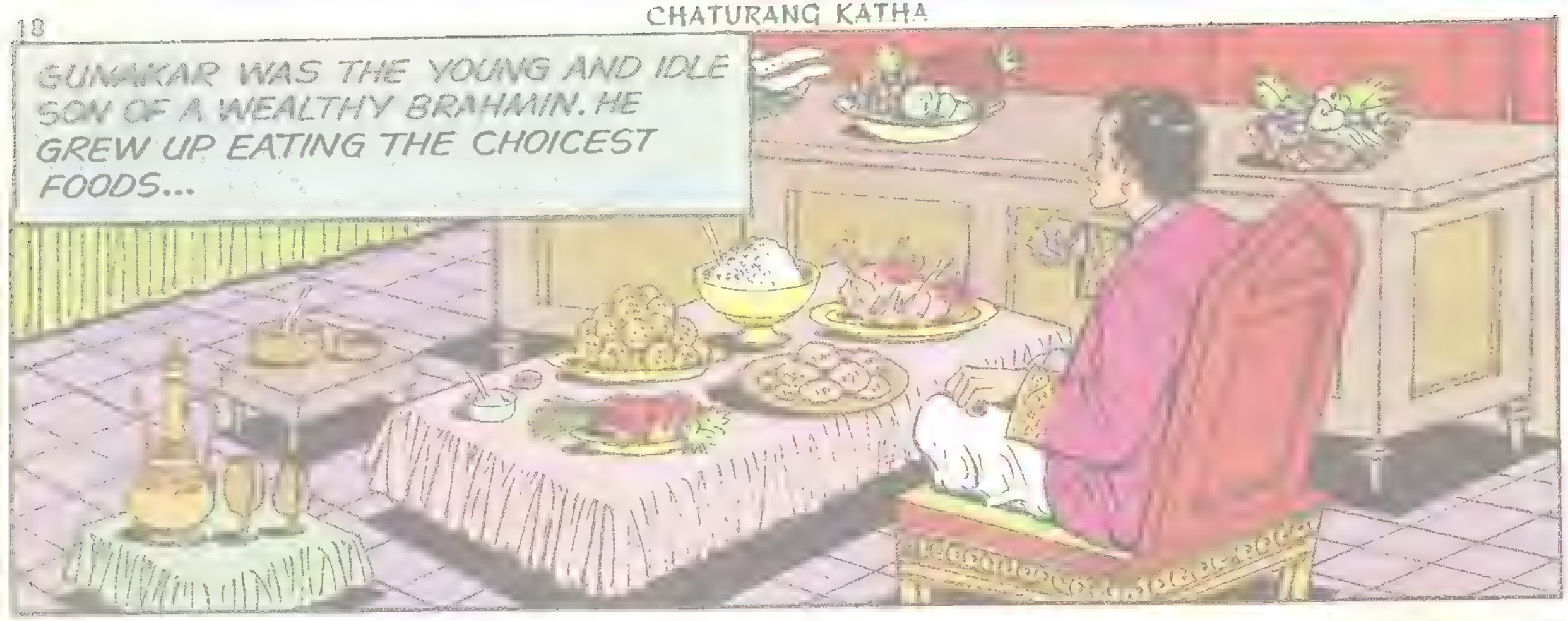
I HAVE BARELY HAD TIME TO RE-GAIN MY BREATH AND YOU ARE READY FOR MY NEXT STORY.

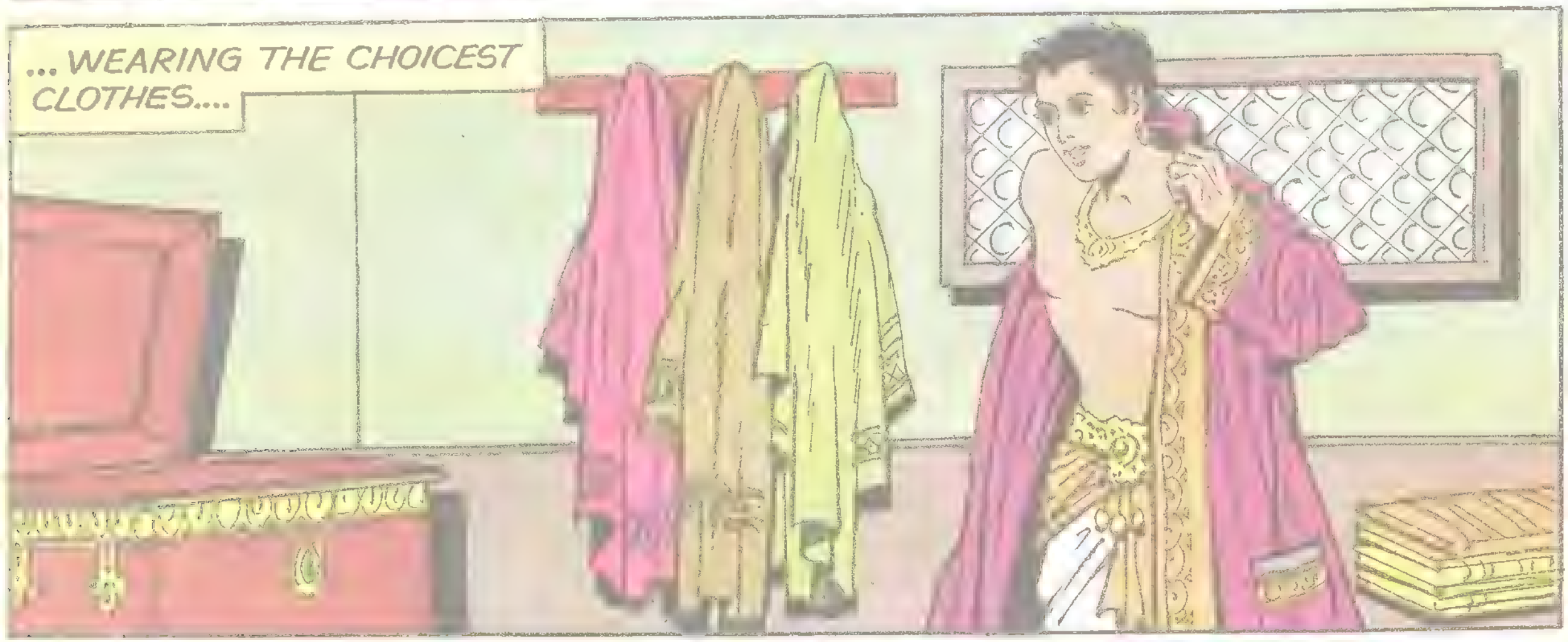
I AM WAITING FOR YOU TO RUN OUT OF STORIES FOR I DON'T SEEM TO BE RUNNING OUT OF ANSWERS!

LISTEN, THEN, TO A TALE OF OLD UJJAINI WHEN KING MAHASENA RULED THE LAND WITH AN IRON HAND.

PERHAPS THAT'S WHAT MY KINGDOM LACKS - A KING WHO CAN FRIGHTEN HIS SUBJECTS INTO MEEK SUBMISSION.

AND ONCE AGAIN, IN A VOICE THAT ROSE AND FELL AND ROSE AGAIN, THE VETALA TOLD HIS TALE.


GUNAKAR WAS THE YOUNG AND IDLE SON OF A WEALTHY BRAHMIN. HE GREW UP EATING THE CHOICEST FOODS...


...WEARING THE CHOICEST CLOTHES....

...AND ENJOYING THE CHOICEST ENTERTAINMENT.

HE DEVELOPED EXTRAVAGANT HABITS, SPENDING MONEY LAVISHLY...

...ENTERTAINING HIS FRIENDS...

...AND GAMBLING TILL THE SMALL HOURS OF THE MORNING.
HERE'S MY LAST PIECE OF GOLD. I HAVE NO MORE.
HE'S TRULY IMPOVERISHED – HE HAS NOTHING HE CAN CALL HIS OWN.

AND WITH HIS WEALTH, HIS DRINKING AND GAMBLING COMPANIONS ALSO VANISHED.

HE WAS EASY GAME!

LET'S LOOK FOR ANOTHER RICH FOOL!

GUNAKAR WAS FACED WITH POVERTY AND LONELINESS.

I MUST LEAVE THIS TOWN AND SEEK MY FORTUNES ELSEWHERE.

AND WITH HIS MEAGRE BUNDLE OF WORLDLY GOODS HE SET OUT TO SEE THE WIDE WORLD OUTSIDE UJJAINI.

AT DUSK HE REACHED THE OUTSKIRTS OF A CITY AND SAW A STRANGE SIGHT.

THAT ASCETIC IS LEANING OVER A BLAZING FIRE AND TAKING DEEP BREATHS OF THE RISING SMOKE!..

HE APPROACHED HIM—

SIR, YOU WILL CHOKE TO DEATH WITH THE HEAT AND SMOKE.

THERE ARE MANY WAYS OF DOING PENANCE—THIS IS MINE. IF I WERE DYING, COULD I SPEAK TO YOU?

AND HE CONTINUED, WITH EYES SHUT.

GUNAKAR WAITED PATIENTLY FOR THE SAGE TO FINISH. THE OLD MAN TURNED TO HIM—

WILL YOU EAT WITH ME?

I AM GRATEFUL. I HAVE NOT EATEN SINCE MORNING.

THE SAGE DISAPPEARED AND IN A LITTLE WHILE-

HERE, EAT. YOU WILL FEEL BETTER.

I WON'T TOUCH THIS. HOW CAN I EAT OUT OF A HUMAN SKULL? THE VERY THOUGHT...

AS YOU PLEASE.

THE ASCETIC STARTED TO CHANT A SPELL AND...

...A YAKSHINI* APPEARED. SHE WAS DIVINELY BEAUTIFUL. GREETING THE SAGE RESPECTFULLY, SHE SAID-

I AM AT YOUR SERVICE, HOLY ONE.

SERVE THIS YOUNG BRAHMIN. HE IS TIRED AND HUNGRY. GIVE HIM DELICATE FARE FOR HE SHUNS COMMON FOOD.

* FEMALE SPIRIT

GUNAKAR WATCHED IN GROWING WONDER AS THE YAKSHINI APPROACHED HIM...

... AND LED HIM TO A PALACE WHICH SUDDENLY ROSE AT HER COMMAND.

THERE, HE SANK INTO A CUSHIONED SEAT...
...WHILE RICH AND VARIED FARE WAS PLACED BEFORE HIM IN DISHES WROUGHT WITH GOLD AND GEMS.

HAVING EATEN, HE WAS BATHED...

...HIS BODY SMEARED WITH SANDAL PASTE...

...AND WRAPPED IN SILKEN CLOTH THAT FELL IN SOFT FOLDS ABOUT HIM.

AS HE WALKED TO A BED CHAMBER FIT FOR A KING–

MY LORD, I WILL PRESS YOUR WEARY FEET AND SING YOU TO SLEEP.

THIS MUST BE A DREAM. MAY I NEVER WAKE UP!

IN THE MORNING, AS GUNAKAR HAD FEARED, THE YAKSHINI WAS GONE. HE APPEALED TO THE SAGE–

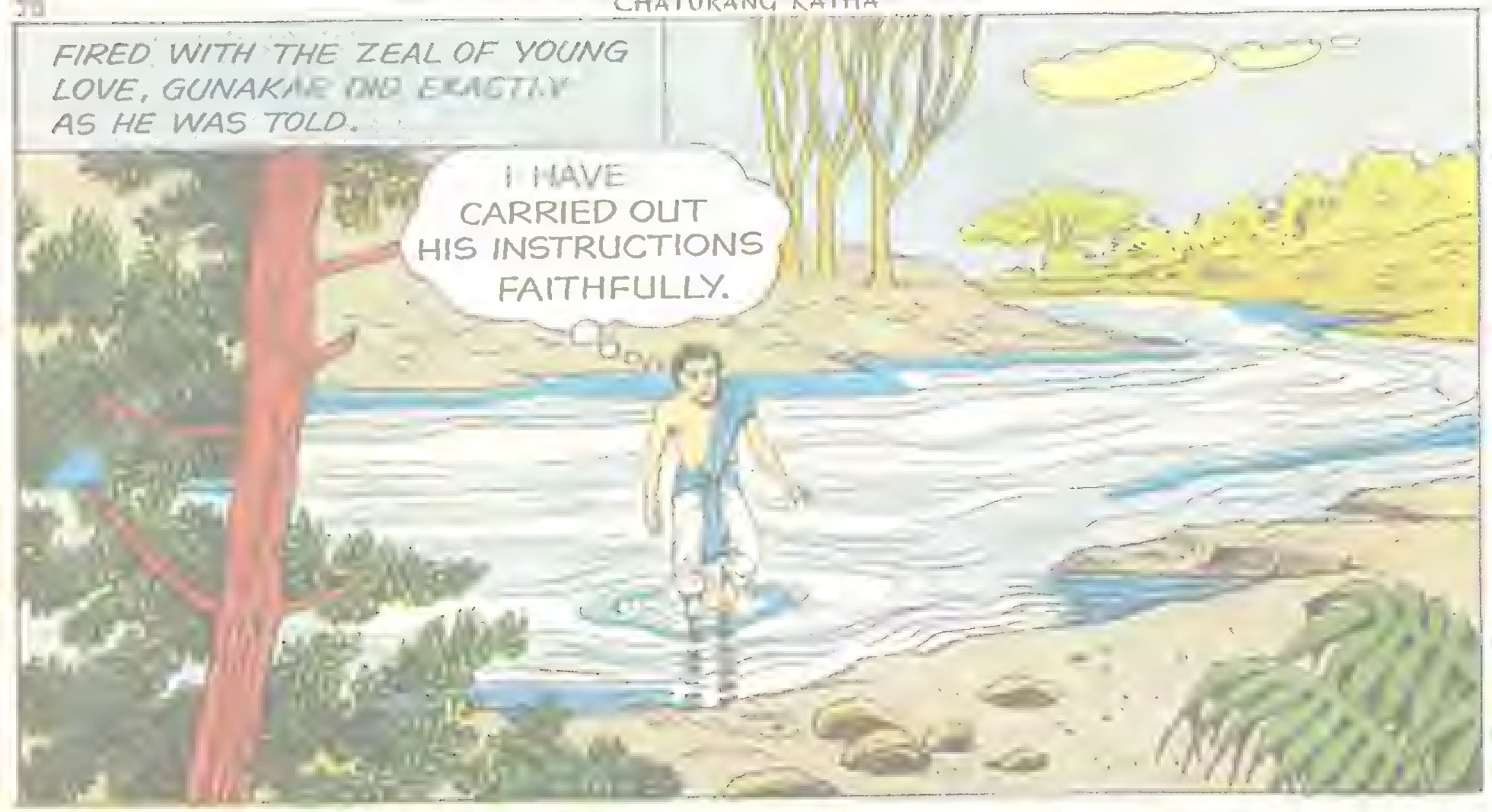
WHAT SHALL I DO? I CAN'T LIVE WITHOUT HER.

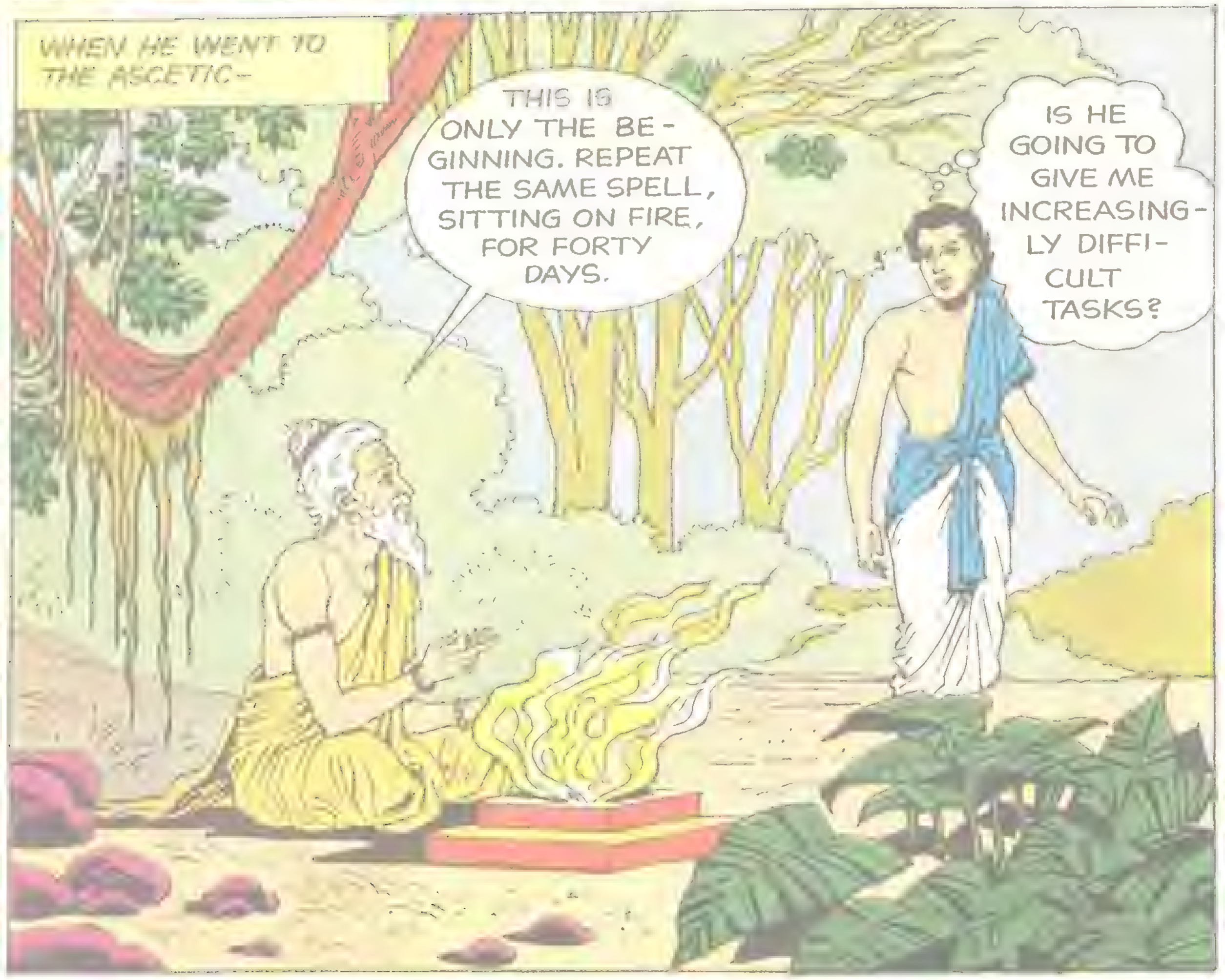
SHE IS SUMMONED BY A MAGIC SPELL. YOU MUST PRACTISE GREAT AUSTERITIES TO ACQUIRE THAT SPELL.

I AM WAITING FOR YOU TO INITIATE ME.

START WITH THIS CHARM. REPEAT IT SITTING IN WATER, AT MIDNIGHT, FOR FORTY DAYS.

AND HE TAUGHT HIM THE WORDS.


FIRED WITH THE ZEAL OF YOUNG LOVE, GUNAKAR DID EXACTLY AS HE WAS TOLD.
I HAVE CARRIED OUT HIS INSTRUCTIONS FAITHFULLY.


WHEN HE WENT TO THE ASCETIC—
THIS IS ONLY THE BE-GINNING. REPEAT THE SAME SPELL, SITTING ON FIRE, FOR FORTY DAYS.
IS HE GOING TO GIVE ME INCREASING-LY DIFFI-CULT TASKS?

HIS RESOLVE WEAKENED.

MASTER, I MUST FIRST VISIT MY FAMILY. I WILL THEN RETURN AND COMPLETE MY PENANCE.

THE SAGE DID NOT STOP HIM.

GUNAKAR WENT HOME AND WAS RECEIVED WARMLY.

WE THOUGHT WE HAD LOST YOU.

WE ARE GLAD YOU HAVE COME BACK TO THE SAFETY AND SECURITY OF FAMILY LIFE.

A FEW DAYS LATER –

I HAVE HAD ENOUGH OF THIS FUTILE, HUM-DRUM EXISTENCE. I THINK I SHALL GO BACK. THAT YAKSHINI HAUNTS ME.

BACK IN THE YAKSHINI'S TERRITORY, GUNAKAR SAT FOR FORTY DAYS ON A BURNING PILE OF LOGS, CHANTING THE SPELL.

BUT SHE DID NOT APPEAR.

FEELING THOROUGHLY DISHEARTENED, HE WENT TO THE SAGE, ADMITTING DEFEAT.

IF YOU HAVE NOT ACQUIRED THE POWER OF SUMMONING THE YAKSHINI BY NOW, YOU NEVER WILL.

THE VETALA'S QUESTION DID NOT TAKE VIKRAMADITYA BY SURPRISE.

WHY, MY WISE KING DID HIS EFFORTS FAIL?

BECAUSE HE WAS IN TWO MINDS; HE LACKED FIXITY OF PURPOSE. HENCE SUCCESS ELUDED HIM.

THE KING'S LAST WORDS HUNG IN THE STILL NIGHT AIR AS THE VETALA DISAPPEARED ONCE AGAIN, BACK TO HIS DISTANT PERCH!
BUT HE DID COME BACK TO COMPLETE HIS PENANCE.
AH, BUT HIS MOMENT OF DOUBT WAS HIS UNDOING. HE WAVERED— AND THE SAGE, DIVINING THIS, WITHDREW HIS BLESSING.

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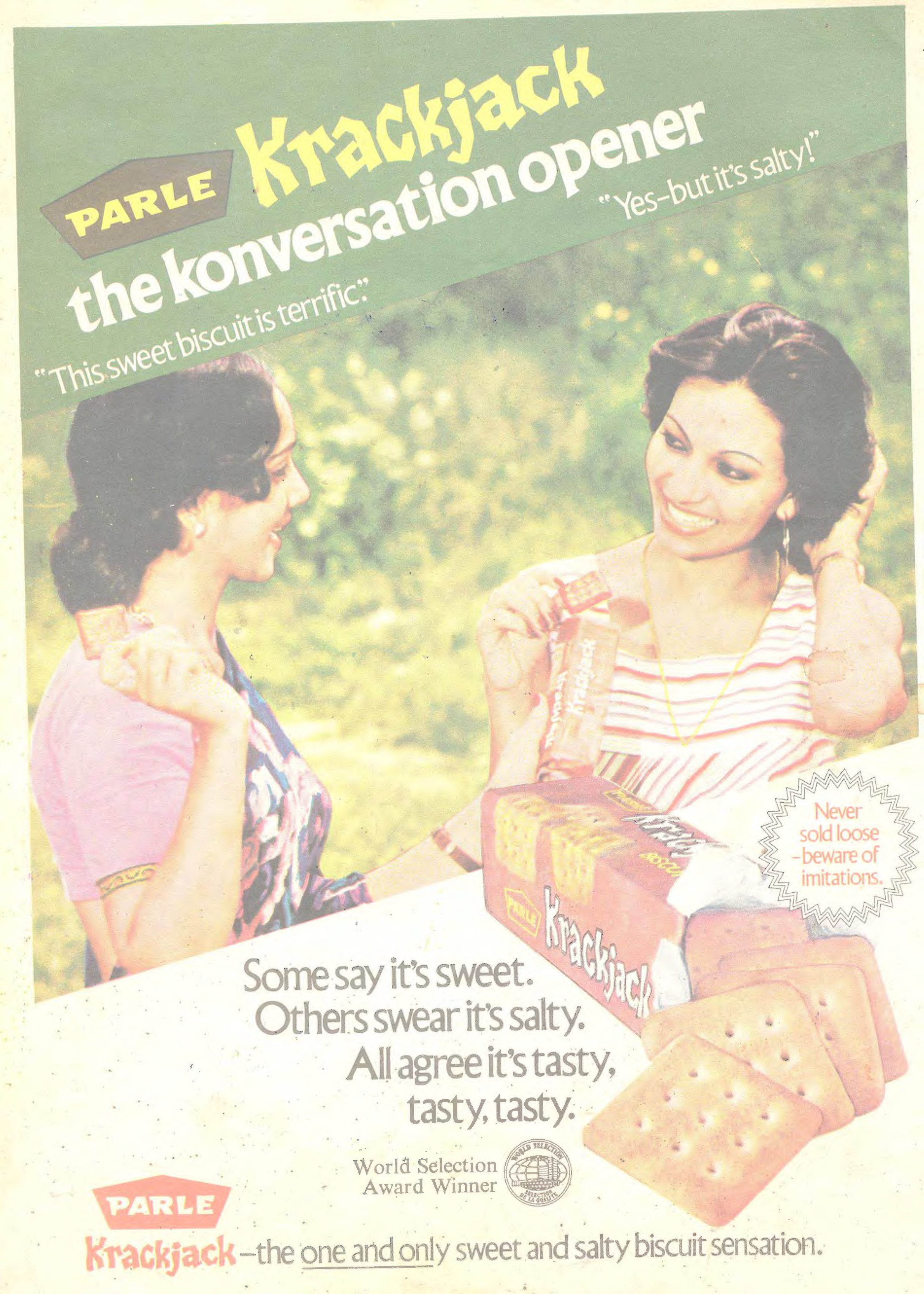
PARLE
Krackjack
the konversation opener
"This sweet biscuit is terrific."
"Yes–but it's salty!"
Never sold loose –beware of imitations.
Some say it's sweet.
Others swear it's salty.
All agree it's tasty,
tasty, tasty.
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